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The Taming of the Three

The centuries following European exploration of the Western Hemisphere in the late 1400s brought sweeping changes to North American peoples and ecology, especially in eastern and southern swathes of the continent. Along with tribes to the west and southwest, Indians of New England and the South had inhabited the Columbus's "New World" for at least 10,000 years.[1] Their ancestors—bands of migrating hunters who may have crossed the postglacial Bering land bridge as many as 50,000 years ago—likely moved small distances in search of game with each passing generation, eventually spreading diverse but sophisticated civilizations as far south as modern day Chile.[2] By 1900, estimates Alfred Crosby, the Columbian Exchange of disease as well as outright violence wrought by an onslaught of traders, settlers, entrepreneurs, missionaries, soldiers, and other westward-drawn Europeans and their descendants had reduced a pre-Columbian population of four to seven million Native Americans by at least 75 percent.[3] Meanwhile, populations of flora and fauna—beaver, deer, moose, elk, wolves, bear, buffalo, ducks, turkeys, and pigeons, multitudes of alewives, sturgeon, shad, salmon, and cetacea, as well as old growth stands of white pine, red and white oak, and cedar—receded in a steady drive to "improve" the environment and harness from it food, furs, fuel, lumber, gold, and other marketable commodities. In evaluating evidence of such wholesale transformation, a process advanced by what Paige Raibmon calls "contemporary mercantilist values that saw commercial people as the final products of 'the natural advancement of human society,'" can one assume that Europe-

[1] William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 33.
[2] Carolyn Merchant, *The Columbia Guide to American Environmental History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 5.
[3] Merchant, *The Columbia Guide*, 5.

ans and Euro-Americans subdued what were once peaceful tribes living in harmony with virgin lands?[4] Did the Whiteman commodify the natural realm completely?

This essay attempts to demonstrate that the sixteenth through nineteenth century milestones of American environmental history can be grouped into three highly interrelated spheres of European influence—Indians, animals, and land—but that the first of these suffered harm of an irreparable and incomparable nature. Under steady pressure from throngs of assiduous immigrants fleeing the Old World, in Crosby's words, "as energetically as from a burning building," the combined weight of these spheres allowed commodification to become an indelible part of the American landscape. Still, the resilient ecology of North America only began to become genuinely subdued by the late nineteenth century; Native peoples, on the other hand, faced bitter twilight at the dawning of the twentieth century.

Before an analysis of the extent to which early America was subdued and commodified can be undertaken, operative definitions of key terms must be established. "Subdue" can refer to conquering "an enemy, a country or its inhabitants" in battle and bringing them "into subjection," to reducing "the intensity, force, or vividness of" something, or to bringing land "under cultivation"—all meanings pertinent to the period in question.[5] Conceiving of "commodification," a construct of central importance to environmental historians William Cronon and Carolyn Merchant, becomes more difficult. To colonists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, "commodity" meant a "parcel of goods sold on credit by a usurer to a needy person, who immediately raised some cash by re-selling them at a lower price," while the modern definition refers more aptly to "A quality or condition of things, in relation to the desires or needs of men."[6]

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[4] Paige Raibmon, "Naturalizing Power: Land and Sexual Violence along William Byrd's Dividing Line," in *Seeing Nature Through Gender*, ed. Virginia J. Scharff (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 21.
[5] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "subdue."
[6] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "commodity."

Hence "commodification" entails "The action of turning something into, or treating something as, a (mere) commodity; commercialization of an activity, etc., that is not by nature commercial."[7] The latter term had no meaning for explorers, merchants, settlers, trappers, woodsmen, agents of the English Crown, and other fortune seekers brazen enough to demand profits from the New England wilderness; it functions instead as a retrospective description of the processes that characterized their conquests.

That commodification attempted to convert things *not by nature commercial* into wares sought after by men is worth noting for several reasons. As a tenet of capitalism—a value system that had not yet taken hold in colonial New England—commodification assumes that all things commercial are capable of satisfying "the desires or needs of men."[8] In a majority of dealings with Native Americans, as this essay will demonstrate, the latter proposition failed miserably. Commodification's very definition also employs the kind of gendered language that grates on the sensibilities of ecofeminist and self-described schoolmarm Virginia Scharff, who reminds us that "the words we use to capture knowledge of our world matter"[9] Indeed, the rhetorical potency of commodification so tainted early accounts of New England's ecosystem that modern historians must question their validity. Cronon laments that "Explorers describing a new countryside with an eye to mercantile possibilities all too easily feel into this way of looking at things, so that their descriptions often denigrated into little more than lists."[10] Lastly, readers should note a certain irony in the fact that tamers of the American wilderness sought to turn *nature*, the epitome of that which is not *by nature* commercial, into a set of commodities that could be bought and sold.

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[7] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "commodification."
[8] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 76.
[9] Virginia J. Scharff, "Man and Nature! Sex Secrets of Environmental History," in *Seeing Nature Through Gender*, ed. Virginia J. Scharff (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 4.
[10] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 21.

Contrary to popular belief, and prior to the first harbingers of European commodification—Marcos de Niza's 1539 exploration of Zuni pueblos in the American Southwest, the landing of the Pilgrims' *Mayflower* on Cape Cod and the establishment of Plymouth Colony in 1620, the arrival of the Puritans a decade later—Native tribes in disparate corners of the continent had to some extent already succeeded in subduing their surroundings.[11] Within seasonal limits, Algonkian, Iriquoian, Siuoan, and Muskogean-speaking tribes of the Southeast, for example, actually enjoyed a more leisurely existence than English peasantry already facing firewood shortages by the 1500s.[12] Between 10-12,000 years ago, the large mammals migrating North American tribesmen had pursued for generations began to become scarce, forcing Indians to rely on fruits, nuts, and smaller game, and become more sedentary. Several thousand years later, groups of families began to cultivate gourds and squash, later adding corn and beans to their diet to complete the "three sisters" that sustained whole villages in Southeast coastal areas offering prolonged growing seasons. Women planted crops together, left them to grow untended, and returned months later to gather the harvest hand, which resulted in tangled-looking fields that nevertheless kept evaporation, erosion, and the spread of weeds to a minimum. Tribes tended to move in annual cycles, netting fish in the spring and hunting bear, deer, and waterfowl in the fall to supplement their agricultural foodstuffs, thereby reducing human impacts on the land. Such Native practices did not so much reflect environmental consciousness as they did a matrix of spiritual relationships with the natural realm and a keen ability to prosperously subsist.

Tribes in colder, northern regions depended less on the three sisters but also developed environmental controls that astutely managed what newly arriving Europeans assumed to be pristine wilderness. "The New England forest at the time of colonial settlement was an open,

[11] Merchant, *The Columbia Guide*, 9-25.
[12] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 20.

park-like terrain created by Indians accustomed to burning the land and clearing the underbrush in the spring and fall," says Merchant.[13] Periodic, low intensity fires allowed New England as well as Southeast Natives to hunt and travel the woods unhindered by thickets, while preserving mature timber protected by thick bark. The edge habitats that developed on the peripheries of burns prompted the growth of edible berries and grasses that attracted elk and deer—game prized for their meat as well as their hides and antlers, and only killed after careful consultation with certain spirits. By utilizing winds and peninsulas, burns could also push droves of wildlife into the arms of waiting hunters. However, no reports of massive depopulations exist, and although torching forested hillsides did contribute to erosion and waste fuel, historians and ecologists agree that the net environmental impacts of Indian fires were positive.[14]

By the time Pilgrim and Puritan settlements began struggling to tame the wilderness that surrounded their stockades in the early 1600s, the most insidious byproduct of the search for commodities in the New World had already begun to upset the delicate balance Native tribes up and down the eastern seaboard had struck with nature. Although fires likely helped the Indians of New England ward off bothersome pests, journals show that they still contended with fleas in the summer months, which may have acted as a vector for bubonic plague in 1616.[15] One of the first recorded outbreaks in North America, the disease spread among villages north of Cape Cod for three years, decimating coastal populations up to thirty miles inland. Cronon argues for an epidemic of a different sort: "Chicken pox seems a more likely cause, since its virus requires only a small host population in order to remain in circulation; it could have traveled in latent form across the Atlantic in the body of a European sailor who might then have developed shin-

[13] Merchant, *The Columbia Guide*, 24.
[14] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 51.
[15] Merchant, *The Columbia Guide,* 25.

gles from which Indians could easily have become infected."[16] Regardless of what pestilence struck southern New England in 1616, the unwitting culprits behind the rash of deadly outbreaks to follow were undeniably the European explorers and merchants who made initial contact with Native tribes. Thus materializes the first of three aforementioned spheres of colonial influence: the Indians, who came to be subdued not only by disease but by a host of related social upheavals.

According to the Beringia theory, the centuries of bitter cold that waves of early migrants endured in crossing the ancient land bridge to the Americas served to weed out diseases prevalent in Europe and Asia. The compounding effect of the icy quarantine, however, was to leave seventeenth century descendants of the first "Amerindians" vulnerable to a string of pathogens associated with domesticated animals and plants of the Old Word. The resulting "virgin soil epidemics" included smallpox, measles, bubonic plague, and scarlet fever, each of which ravaged and revisited Native populations in accordance with the "type of disease, mode of transmission, rapidity of the spread of contagion, density of population, and types of contact with Europeans."[17] Shortly after coastal New England suffered its mystery plague, for example, smallpox struck down half of the St. Lawrence region's Huron nation, who were actively trading furs with the French in the 1620s. More than a century later, a similar epidemic killed half of the Southeast's Cherokee Indians, and then two-thirds of the Omaha in 1800. In the 1820s, a deadly fever wiped out a full 80 percent of Natives living along the Northwest's lower Columbia River, and between 1837 and 1838, half of the Great Plains Indians perished in yet another outbreak of the plague. Indian customs involving sweat lodges and crowded quarters did little to stave off such

[16] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 87.
[17] Merchant, *The Columbia Guide*, 6.

diseases, and sometimes hastened their spread; all told, the virgin soil epidemics took 400 years to run their course.

Many Indians suspected links between epidemics—which left tribes so weakened "that no one remained to bury the corpses, and crows and wolves feasted on them where they lay"—and the pale-faced traders who sought pelts and the bands of inexperienced colonists desperate for food.[18] But for the Mi'qmaq of southeastern Canada and other tribes of the North, argues Calvin Martin in *Keepers of the Game*, explanations for scourges that struck prior to European settlement may have stemmed from mystical traditions. Martin's work also purports to explain why Natives participated so vigorously in the extermination of the beaver and other fur-bearing mammals coveted by French, English, and Euro-American merchants. As the machinations of commodification begin to fall into place, the nexus of two spheres of European influence—Indians and animals—becomes apparent.

The Mi'qmaq conceived of the universe as a matrix of supernatural beings—rocks, trees, animals, rivers, and so on—that existed in constant conversation with one another. Relationships between Indians and the sacred realm were governed by manitou, a kind of spiritual potency possessed in differing amounts by all creatures. Shamans acted as intermediaries, negotiating permission for hunters to kill bears and other powerful beasts, but only after particular rituals and taboos had been observed, lest the spirits punish the tribe. "Mink were to be hung on trees and gutted to show other mink that the fur and meat had actually been used and not wasted," notes Merchant.[19] To the Mi'qmaq, the sudden savagery of the epidemics—which left 90 percent of the tribe dead over 300 years—meant war with the sacred realm, and the freedom to retaliate against beaver in desperation. Before Europeans began to arrive in large numbers, the spiritual

[18] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 87.
[19] Merchant, *The Columbia Guide*, 12.

edifices that shaped the day-to-day lives of tribes like the Mi'qmaq, the very beliefs that girded their world view, had begun to crack. Understandably, then, calls from merchants and missionaries for Indians to respectively stockpile pelts and renounce their animistic faiths were heeded by some who escaped disease. While more progressive settlers later attempted to offer dying Indians aid, Massachusetts Bay Colony Governor John Winthrop's response to a tribal epidemic in 1643 typified the colonial mindset: "So as the Lord hath cleared our title to what we possess."

Even if, as Cronon suggests, Martin's "appeal to a spiritual holy war" to explain the Natives' willingness to slaughter beaver "trivializes the social and economic circumstances that led Indians to engage in trade in the first place," two things become clear.[20] First, that disease dealt unimaginable physical and social, if not spiritual blows to tribes across the North American continent, and second, that Natives simultaneously facilitated the commodification of wildlife in the New World for want of European goods. Indians came to appreciate brass and copper pots, woven fabrics, hatchets, knives, needles, fishhooks, guns, alcohol, and wampum—white and purple beads made from grinding the shells of Long Island Sound mollusks, which served as Native currency in the early 1600s before losing value—as much for their material advantages as for the power and prestige such items conferred on an owner. The "many early explorers who came across Indians wearing brass and copper jewelry," speculates Cronon, "were probably seeing what Indians believed to be—along with arrowheads—the proper use of European brass and copper kettles."[21] Influxes of such commodities introduced foreign, divisive conceptions of personal property into Native communities long characterized by unbounded generosity.

In exchange for European products, and under pressure from merchants, Native trappers began harvesting pelts in unprecedented numbers—the first of many campaigns instigated by

[20] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 91.
[21] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 95.

Euro-Americans to consume whole species to the point of extinction. Merchant estimates there were 50 million beaver in North America in 1600, but Europe's obsession with fur hats quickly eliminated the animal from the Northeast, along with lynx, otter, fox, mink, and other trappable species dependent on pond habitats created by beaver dams.[22] Similarly, most of the buffalo that roamed across much of the Great Plains well into the nineteenth century—and provided Indians of both the eastern tall grass and western short grass prairies food, clothing, and tools—were eradicated in a ten to fifteen year period in the late 1800s.[23]

Although western short-grass Plains tribes such as the Arapaho, Assiniboine, Atsina, Blackfeets, Cheyenne, Comanche, Crow, Kiowa, and Souix had a less pronounced role to play in the wholesale slaughter of bison than New England Natives did in the erasure of their region's beaver, the introduction of European commodities had similar effects on Plains cultures devastated by disease. Horses and guns became "signs of wealth and prestige" and introduced new power hierarchies among tribes that grew increasingly nomadic.[24] Even the Ghost Dances of Northern Paiute prophet Wovoka in the late 1880s were an amalgam of Native practices influenced by Christianity, and could not bring back the old ways of life and the far-off rumble of buffalo herds that once stretched up 50 square miles.[25] By 1890, less than a thousand buffalo remained in North America, down from an estimated sixty to 100 million head near the end of the pre-Columbian era. As with other trends in commodification, the mass harvesting of bison—some hunters only sought meat from the beast's tongue—had already sealed the death and

[22] Merchant, *The Columbia Guide*, 12-13.
[23] Merchant, *The Columbia Guide,* 20.
[24] Merchant, *The Columbia Guide,* 17.
[25] Merchant, *The Columbia Guide,* 15.

subjugation of the Plains Indians. In the words of one U.S. Army commander bent on slaughter in 1867, "Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone."[26]

The third and final interrelated sphere of influence that Europeans and Euro-Americans brought to bear on the North American continent concerns the land—an element that first haunted colonists trying to subsist in foreign territory, but later became commodified and subdued, albeit to a lesser extent than Native tribes. Stepping off the *Mayflower* in the 1620, soon-to-be Plymouth Colony Governor William Bradford remarked that he was entering a "desolate wilderness." Cotton Mather, an influential Puritan minister writing in the early 18th century, conceived of the American woodlands as a primeval forest where serpents and devils lurked. To the colonists, then, controlling nature's dark powers seemed the only answer. In keeping with God's will handed down in Genesis, settlers set about being fruitful and increasing in number so that they might "fill the earth and subdue it." Not until seventeenth and eighteenth century Romantics began to appreciate the pathos of Lord Byron's "pathless woods" did new conceptions about wilderness emerge, although the desire to exploit nature remained a paramount ideology up until the twentieth century.

One of the primary means by which settlers and townships subdued nature in colonial times was fire. In the mid-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, New Englanders simply re-burned areas already cleared by Native tribes, but soon new areas such as swamps were torched. Colonists set many fires with the aim of collecting potash, or the charred remains of burned trees, as a commodity that could be marketed for use in fertilizer, soap, and gunpowder. Like the Indians before them, New England colonists also sought to promote the growth of raspberries, strawberries, and the blueberries of northeastern Maine and Canada, as well other as exotic plants that attracted game. Fires made for fertile fields, which were typically be planted with corn in the

[26] Merchant, *The Columbia Guide,* 19.

first year before removing leftover stumps with a second burn to allow for grain crops. Throughout the South, where more land was burned per acre than anywhere else, "woodsburning" became a commonplace method of creating rangeland for roving cattle herds. European fires differed from Native burns in that Europeans cleared land in a linear fashion, opening up fields for agriculture and grazing and then pushing west once grasses and nutrients were depleted. During unusually dry years, out-of-control fires often gutted large swathes of land, darkening the skies and necessitating laws that limited burning and required those responsible to pay farmers and homeowners for damages. "Colonists thus modified the Indians' practice of large-scale communal burning in order to accommodate it to European notions of fixed property boundaries; fire was not to trespass across such boundaries under penalty of law"—a prohibition that has had profoundly negative ecological effects over the long term.[27]

Once colonial settlements east of the Appalachians began to grow and become capable of taming the wilderness, timber harvests and agriculture—often working in tandem—emerged as two primary forces of commodification that acted upon the land. "New England towns required a regular supply of wood long after their fields were cleared, and their efforts to obtain it extended the process of deforestation," notes Cronon.[28] While sawmills sprang to life along rivers in order meet an increasing demand for processed lumber, and often became the epicenters of new settlements, the real toll on surrounding woodlands came from fuel consumption. Cronon estimates that "A typical New England household probably consumed as much as thirty or forty cords of firewood per year"—which necessitated leveling an acre of forest—so that by 1800 "the region burned perhaps eighteen times more wood for fuel than it cut for lumber."[29] Gradually, the New England landscape changed from what was once "an open, park-like terrain" dominated

[27] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 118.
[28] Cronon, *Changes in the Land,* 119.
[29] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 120-121.

by woodlands to a pastoral web of townships surrounded by barren fields that lay some distances from forestlands.

Colonial America's penchant for large scale agriculture was felt nowhere more strongly than in the South. Despite their long growing seasons, tobacco, and later, cotton became the crops of choice for plantation owners looking to turn a fast profit. Such farming, what agricultural historians call "the purposeful manipulation of land for the surplus of goods with an increasing annual yield," proved be a difficult endeavor. Raising tobacco further depleted already poor soils, and required intensive labor. By the late 1600s, prices for indentured servants had risen while tobacco prices dropped, leaving farmers unable to expand westward. In response, farmers began taking better care of their fields by planting nitrogen-fixing legumes and rotating their crops, and later heeded the advice of tobacco planters John Taylor and Edmund Ruffin, who encouraged farmers to cultivate with plows, remove stumps from fields, and fertilize. The importation of slaves from Africa filled the South's craving for labor, but by the late seventeenth century only rich plantation owners could afford to buy new slaves. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 reinvigorated southern agriculture, as well as the commodification of human labor, paving the road to the Civil War decades later.

In sum, the forces involved in the European settlement of North America fall into three broadly defined spheres of influence: Indians, animals, and land, each of which involved complex processes of commodification. The most gruesome and permanently damaging of these effects was the subjection of Native peoples in New England, the South, the North, the Great Plains, the Northwest, and the Southwest to a 400-year-long barrage of Old World diseases that claimed the lives of at least three out of four Indians by 1900. Left defenseless to these pathogens by an evolutionary fluke, tribal societies collapsed into chaos, and in some cases vanished

completely. Those who survived were left to reckon with what must have seemed the cruel work of spirits. Indians who did connect the epidemics to the arrival of Europeans were forced to take up lowly positions in an economic hierarchy that favored the virulent Whiteman and worked to strip away beaver, buffalo, forests, and other mainstays of Native cultures. Compare this experience to Cronon's assessment of wildlife in colonial America, a time when whole Indian villages were dying off: "Declining animal populations would not be noticed for many years, but habitat conditions were already shifting to produce that effect."[30] When viewed alongside local ecological disturbances such as excess trapping in the Northeast, badly managed clear-cutting near townships, and monocultures in the South, it becomes clear that Europeans and Euro-Americans had all but completely subdued North America's Indians by 1900, while the rest of the natural realm was at that time in history commodified and subdued to a significantly lesser extent.

[30] Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 91.